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The Empire Strikes Back!

By Gerald Clarke

And so does George Lucas in the second of his Star Wars epics

Well, it took them long enough, but here they come. All the old friends and some favorite enemies have returned to brighten up this unhappy spring. There's Luke Skywalker, that gee whiz kid from Tatooine, and there's Princess Leia, that cosmic mankiller. There are Han Solo and his furry 8-ft. friend Chewbacca trying to get their beat-up old tub, the Millennium

Falcon, to make the jump into hyperspace. And back, of course, are the Laurel and Hardy of the robot set, Artoo Detoo and

See Threepio, in fine beep and polish.

But wait. What is that ominous sound in the background, that heavy breathing that strikes terror in the hearts of all those who love peace and freedom? It could only be the scourge of the universe, the nastiest man from here to infinity, Archvillain Darth Vader, the Dark Lord of Sith and leader of the Imperial Forces. It is time, in other words, to hurry up, buy the popcorn, M&M's, or whatever else you like to munch in front of the silver screen, and grab a seat for *The Empire Strikes Back*.

This sequel to *Star Wars*, which easily toppled *Jaws* as the most successful movie in Hollywood history, opens in Britain and in 125 theaters around the U.S. on May 21, and that is not a millisecond too soon for those children, everybody under the age of 90, who have been waiting since 1977 to find out what happens next. Three expensive science fiction films—*Star Trek*, *The Black Hole* and *Alien*—have opened in the past year, but none has claimed the public's affection like the adventure fantasy of Producer-Creator George Lucas. The question now is: Can he do it again?

Whether Lucas, 36, will break his own world record is uncertain, of course, but he and Director Irvin Kershner have certainly tried. With the money Lucas made from *Star Wars*, he built for *The Empire* the world's largest sound stage and what may be its most sophisticated special effects studio. Tricks that were hard first time around were easy the second time, and new harder ones were thought up. Actors who were not sure what they were doing spouting Lucas' Classics comics dialogue were enthusiastic about the sequel. "Star Wars was basically a 'Let's Get Darth Vader' story line, all action and little dialogue," says Carrie Fisher, who plays haughty Princess Leia. "The Empire has romance, minor tragedies and characters working more off each other. Sure, it's a fairy tale, just like the first, but it has an additional dimension."

When *Star Wars* ended, the rebels—the good guys—had just destroyed the Empire's Death Star and were giving their two new heroes, Luke and Han Solo

(Mark Hamill and Harrison Ford), some shiny medals to hang on their key chains. Darth Vader (David Prowse) had sneaked out through the back hatch, however, and as *The Empire* opens, he is sending the forces of the evil Empire to rout the rebels from their hideout on the ice planet Hoth. Giant walking tanks blast the rebel fortress, and Solo, Leia, Chewbacca (Peter Mayhew) and See Threepio (Anthony Daniels) barely manage to escape in the Millennium Falcon. That uncertain vessel refuses, however, to leap into hyperspace, and in order to evade pursuing Empire fighters, Solo runs through a perilous asteroid field. "They'd be crazy to follow us in here," he says. Eventually, they find what they think is refuge in a city in the clouds ruled by Solo's old friend in mild skulduggery, Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams).

Luke, meantime, has been visited by the holographic presence of Obi-Won Kenobi, or Ben Kenobi (Alec Guinness), who was translated to incorporeal planes by Vader in *Star Wars*. With the power of the Force behind them, old Jedi Knights never die, it seems; they just fade in and out. Ben Kenobi tells Luke to seek out someone named Yoda on the Planet

Dagobah. Ben did not say that the place is all jungles and swamps, and Luke soon finds himself knee deep in muck.

Suddenly a strange little creature pops out. He looks like one of the gargoyles with whom the Hunchback used to play at Notre Dame. He even spouts a kind of Chaucerian Middle English, with many of his verbs and adjectives piling up at the end of sentences.

Luke tries to shoo him away but discovers that this is his Jedi master.

Yoda, a 26-in.-tall Muppet operated by Frank Oz, the man in charge of Miss Piggy, is one of Lucas' great fantastics. Part elf and part wizard, he is Dagobah's answer to the High Lama of Shangrila. He has been training Jedi Knights for 800 years. At first he hardly wants to talk to Luke. "No good," he says to Ben Kenobi, who has hovered into view once again. "I cannot instruct him. The boy has no patience. Much anger in him, like his father. All his life has he looked away—to the horizon, to the sky, to the future. Never his mind on where he was, on what he was doing. Adventure, excitement. A Jedi craves not these things!"

Eventually, of course, Yoda relents and instructs Luke in the ways of the Jedi and the uses of the Force, that strange, mystical power that all Jedis possess. "Life creates it and makes it grow," the little gnome explains. "Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we . . . Feel the flow. Feel the Force around you." Luke does, to a degree. By an exertion of will he can move rocks and other small objects—like a wildly beeping and protesting Artoo Detoo. Yet when he tries to raise his ship, which is mired in the swamp, Luke fails. He then watches in amazement as Yoda levitates it to dry land. "I don't believe it," he says. "That," retorts Yoda, "is why you fail."

Luke learns enough, however, to give Darth Vader a spirited battle with his lightsword at the end of the film. But Vader proves a difficult foe to vanquish. That is just as well for the story because the Dark Lord is far more menacing in *The Empire* than he was in *Star Wars*, infused with hitherto unknown ambitions and desires, possessed of a mysterious past. There is a hint of a complex personality, and Vader, like all good villains, commands the screen whenever he appears, his black robes floating behind him like the shrouds of death. But once he has been given such prominence, he is a hard character for even his creator to control. In *Star Wars*, Vader was soundly defeated, and there was a rousing celebration of good over evil, with an appropriate flourish of John Williams' triumphant music. With Vader dominating, perhaps even more than Lucas intended, *The Empire* finishes on a less satisfying and more ambiguous note.

In many ways the new film is a better film than *Star Wars*, visually more exciting, more artful and meticulous in detail. As a special effects wizard, Lucas fairly dazzles the eye with his optical magic. In one scene, for instance, the walking tanks are impervious to ordinary weapons, and Luke and his band of intrepid fighter pilots are forced to use older methods. Circling the legs of one of the giant camel-like machines, a rebel fighter ensnares it, and it crumbles to the ground. On-screen that intricate maneuver takes perhaps 60 sec., but to put it there took the technicians at his Industrial Light and Magic Inc. three months. Most impressive of all is the Millennium Falcon's voyage through the asteroid field as it attempts to elude pursuing Imperial fighters. Huge rocks whiz by. The Falcon and the fighters dance around them in a frantic effort to avoid being pulverized. For a few moments the scene fools the eye into believing it is seeing three dimensions, so care-'ully is the work textured.

To achieve such realism, the Light and Magic crew made great advances in film technology. One of the devices they used was a \$500,000 machine called a quad printer, which consists of four projectors. Each projector holds separate bits of film. In the asteroid scene, for example, one would show the zooming Falcon, another the model asteroids, a third would show the stars shining in the background, and a fourth such things as shadows, laser beams and explosions. All four machines would then project their images through a prism, which would combine them into one seamless film. Models were carefully synchronized by computers, moreover, and scenes using effects of enormous complexity could be duplicated as many times as necessary.

Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the pioneer space fantasy, had 35 separate special-effects shots. *Star Wars*, which made good use of nine more years of development in computer technology, had 380. *The Empire* has 414. Yet even that number is deceptive; some of *The Empire's* shots are far beyond anything in *Star Wars* in daring and sophistication.

The sound effects are also something of a wonder, and Soundman Ben Burtt has conjured up noises never before heard on earth. To find a voice for Chewbacca, reports *TIME* Correspondent James Willwerth, Burtt combined bears growling, a walrus grunting, a seal barking, a tiger roaring and a lizard—a big lizard—hissing. The result, as anybody who has ever traveled to the planet Kashyyyk knows, is pure Wookie. For Darth Vader, Lucas wanted a sinister sound. Burtt put a tiny microphone inside a scuba tank regulator and found what Lucas wanted: the sound of labored, but mechanical breathing. "The biggest dilemma," he says, "is always to create a sound which sounds familiar and has an association with reality but yet is not identifiable."

The actors, more certain of who they are supposed to be, seem more comfortable in this film, though life on the set was not always celestial. Captured at the beginning by one of Hoth's furry ice monsters, Mark Hamill is hung up inside the monster's cave like a side of beef. "I hung seven days upside down in that snow cave," he says. "I had to do it for both the first and second units—all for about 90 seconds worth of film." Real snakes were used in the Dagobah swamp scenes. Once when Hamill brushed away a snake from his dinner bowl in a scene with Yoda, the reptile slithered down the Muppet's costume onto a very surprised Frank

Oz, who jumped right off the set, yelping loudly enough to be heard throughout the thousand worlds.

In some scenes Artoo Detoo is played by a real robot; but in closeups little Kenny Baker is the brain and motor within. Baker had a hard time moving that heavy tin can in *Star Wars*, and his new model Artoo Detoo was a big improvement; it was lighter and easier to push, and it did not have the bruising nuts and bolts the old model had inside. Unfortunately for Baker, he is fast becoming obsolete. The real robots were much smarter than they were in *Star Wars*, and they were able to do many action shots better than the Baker-controlled Artoo did in that film.

One thing stayed the same in both movies: the security on the set of *The Empire* would put the CIA to shame. Several of the actors were given their own lines only, with the speeches of other actors neatly crossed out on the script. The biggest surprise comes in the climactic

duel. Prowse was given dummy lines to say, and the real lines were later dubbed by James Earl Jones, the voice of Vader in both movies. "I don't know much about what happens in the picture," admits Prowse. "I have no idea what occurs in a sequence before I appear or after I leave the screen. They were paranoid, really paranoid, about security."

Sequels of giant hits, like children who follow Daddy's favorite, always have an unfair burden. They are not examined on their own merits but in relationship to the picture everyone loved. In many ways Lucas and Kershner have overcome that handicap. The Empire Strikes Back is a more polished and, in some ways, a richer film. But to imitate Yoda's way of speaking, and to answer the obvious question, as much fun it is not.

Looking back at Star Wars and his other big movie, American Graffiti, Lucas discovered a common ingredient, what he calls an "effervescent giddiness." It is not a bad analysis, and Star Wars had more of it than does The Empire. There are many amusing scenes, as before mostly involving Artoo Detoo, Threepio and Chewbacca. Lucas' imagination once again lays out its bounty in a lavish and wonderful spread. The invention of Yoda alone would keep many film makers bragging for years. Lucas adds ice monsters, strange-looking beasts—half dinosaur, half llama—that can be ridden bareback, the city in the clouds, and at least one surprising twist of plot involving Luke and Darth Vader. Unfortunately, there are not enough of those other bubbles of fun and spontaneity that made Star Wars so memorable.

Following the example of Lucas, who picked him to direct the new film, Kershner, 57, drives the action at something approaching hyperspeed. At times he goes too fast. The Empire moves so quickly through its two hours that some of the plot lines blur. In the city in the clouds, for instance, Threepio blunders into a group of Imperial storm troopers. But the troopers are never seen, and only later, when the tape of Threepio's last words is automatically played back, does the audience realize what has happened to him. At the film's end, Luke and Leia suddenly find themselves safe aboard a rebel flagship. It will take a good memory—or a second or third viewing, a low rate of return for Star Wars cultists—to recall that the ship was supposed to wait for them at a predetermined rendezvous.

Perhaps because Lucas is trying to carry the story into his next "chapter," he has not provided The Empire with a true ending. The result is not very satisfying for those who see this picture, however, and one is left with a nagging sense of incompleteness, a feeling of being somewhat shortchanged. In the grand design, there are to be several connected movies, one leading directly into the other, just as Star Wars led into The Empire, with an invisible "To Be Continued" at the end of each one. Lucas wants his galactic adventures to go on and on like the Saturday-morning TV serials he loved as a kid. In Star Wars, he managed to have both an end and a continuation; in The Empire he has only the continuation, and audiences will have to wait for some Saturday three years hence, when the next segment is released.

When Star Wars was completed, Lucas, who had been drained by the experience, said that he would let others direct the rest of the series. Kershner was chosen for The Empire because Lucas admired his ability to deal with human relationships. Lucas himself seems a little uncomfortable with real actors, and when he was making American Graffiti, his wordless style became a friendly gag among the actors. Richard Dreyfuss later joked that he was on the set three weeks before he knew that the director could speak English. While The Empire was being made, Lucas showed up at the London studios, where the interiors were shot, only three times. "I'd invite him to stand by the camera," says Kershner, "and he

wouldn't. He'd say, 'It's your picture.' Then he'd stand way, way back somewhere, craning his neck." Kershner added his own touches, such as softer, more reflected lighting than the direct light Lucas employed in Star Wars. But he was always operating with Lucas' story, and he knew that Lucas, diffident as he was, was looking over his shoulder. If Lucas was in California, a videotape of the rushes was flown from London after each day's shooting.

Almost everyone who creates a fictional world as rich as Lucas' identifies with one or more of his characters. In Star Wars there was a lot of Lucas in Luke, the wide-eyed farmboy who was always yearning for bigger things. In The Empire Yoda is his alter ego. Yoda's speeches might almost be called The Wit and Wisdom of George Lucas. Like Yoda, Lucas is a devout believer in the Force. Says Lucas: "When you are born, you have an energy field around you. You could call it an aura. An archaic description would be a halo. It is an idea that has gone all the way through history. When you die, your energy field joins all other energy fields in the universe, and while you're still living that larger energy field is sympathetic to your own energy field."

The Force is neutral, and it can be used for good or evil, by Yoda and Ben Kenobi or by Darth Vader. As Luke leaves Yoda to do combat with Vader, both of those old Jedi masters fear that he may be seduced by the dark side of the Force, just as Vader was. The issue is not resolved when the film ends. "The Force has two sides," explains Lucas. "It is not a malevolent or a benevolent thing. It has a bad side to it, involving hate and fear, and it has a good side, involving love, charity, fairness and hope. If you use it well, you can see the future and the past. You can sort of read minds and you can levitate and use that whole netherworld of psychic energy." So far, however, Lucas can do none of those marvelous things.

What he can do is persist and prevail over most obstacles. When he thinks he is right, he is as stubborn as Chewbacca. When Luke doubts that he can raise his spaceship from the swamp, Yoda stamps his foot. "So sure are you?" he demands. "Tried have you? Always with you it can't be done. Hear you nothing that I say? Try not. Do! Do! Or do not. There is no try." Remembering Lucas' childhood, his father, George Lucas Sr., recalls a blank stare when he tried to persuade his son to do something he did not want to do. "Frankly, we just didn't understand George," the elder Lucas confesses. "I'd try to get a point across and he'd just sit there and look at me. I'd just run out of breath. He wouldn't pay any attention."

His father owned a stationery and office-supply store in Modesto, Calif., and George would annoy him by spending most of his time poring over all the comic books on the racks. Let that be a lesson to all those who deride this great American art form: it was the comic books, together with the television serials, that ignited young Lucas' imagination. Says he: "When I was in film school I went back and saw how awful some of those serials were. I began to analyze what in them could have excited me so much as a child, and I realized that they were a form of fantasy much more akin to mythology and fairy tales than anything else. I started getting involved with such stories and wondered what their purpose was in society. I came to the conclusion that the last real fairy tale we had had was the western."

While he was writing the script for Star Wars, he read books on mythology, fantasy and anthropology. "I wanted Star Wars to have an epic quality," he says, 'so I went back to the epics. Whether they are subconscious or unconscious, whatever needs they meet, they are stories that have pleased or provided comfort to people for thousands of years. The basic

fears and mysteries go all the way back to the cave men. What is the mystery of life? What is this world we are trapped in? All you have to do is see the possibilities and you can reiterate them."

Both of his space sagas have mythological themes, but, so adroit is Lucas' art, both of them can be enjoyed simply as rousing adventure stories, which they are. "I'm not out to be thought of as an artist," Lucas declares. "It's a big world and everybody doesn't have to be significant. The Empire is as complicated as any movie, and it's saying a lot of things. But I don't like to come out with a big sign and say, 'This is significant.' " He adds: "I'm not stopping to explain anything—ever."

After the success of Star Wars, which cost \$10.5 million to make and has so far grossed more than \$400 million at box offices worldwide, he does not have to explain anything—ever. After the theater owners took their share, 20th Century-Fox took its piece, and advertising and distribution costs were subtracted, Lucas came away from Star Wars with about \$51 million on paper, or 40% of the \$128 million in net profits. To get the people he wanted, however, he gave away through negotiation a quarter of his profits. Guinness, for example, received, apart from his salary, 2% of the film's net—or points, as they are called—which later added up to \$2,880,000. Then Lucas, who is remarkably generous, voluntarily gave away another 25% of his profits. Someone like Carrie Fisher, who had been given a salary but no points in her contract, received one-quarter of 1%, or \$320,000. Those who worked on the set got a minimum of one-twentieth of 1% (\$64,000). Some employees in Lucas' office, who had nothing at all to do with the movie, got a minimum of one two-hundredths of 1% (\$6,400). At the end, with other deductions, Lucas came out with somewhere between \$22 million and \$26 million for himself. When the IRS left, that was reduced to \$12 million. That is still a lot of money, but Lucas used just about all of it as collateral to borrow the \$22 million ultimately needed to make The Empire. He says he kept only \$50,000 or so for his own living expenses. "The truth of it is that I'm very overextended right now."

If The Empire does even half as well as its predecessor, Lucas has big personal plans for the future. He and his wife Marcia, 34, a top film editor in her own right, have bought 2,000 acres in Marin County, about 50 miles north of San Francisco, where Lucas wants to set up a colony in which young film makers can practice their skills. "I'm trying to develop a place that is designed to stimulate creativity, especially among writers. They will have Monday-morning story conferences, and then we'll let them go off and write, good, bad or indifferent."

Like Disney, all those forgotten men who created the serials he watched and Homer himself, Lucas is basically a storyteller. That is what he does best, that is what he loves, and that is what he will continue to do until the Star Wars epic is completed, some time around the year 2000. Until then, may the Force be with him.